

## ←From the powder room

### Charlotte Huddleston

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←In a story dating from 1160 Benoît de Sainte-Maure describes a place called the *chamber de beauté* (room of beauty), an enclosed and protected paradise, whose entrance was guarded by four statues corresponding to the senses. The first held a mirror allowing those approaching to “contemplate herself in all of her truth, for the mirror never lied.”<sup>1</sup> An empowering experience, akin to the Lacanian mirror stage of self-recognition. Upon entering the *chamber de beauté* itself one finds a flaming stone possessing the power to heal pain and banish foolish desire. Similarly, at the beginning of her feminist novel *The Women’s Room* Marilyn French has the character Mira seeking refuge in the women’s room reflecting upon her need to hide and studying the revealing graffiti on the back of the toilet door.

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←The exhibition *Powder Room* at the Gus Fisher Gallery marks the latest presentation of Hye Rim Lee’s ongoing series *TOKI/Cyborg Project: game, pop and cyber world*. In her latest appearance Hye Rim Lee’s cyborg TOKI has reached a new stage of development. For *Powder Room* Lee has presented a trio of works, two of which, *Super Toy* and *Powder Room*, show TOKI under construction and refinement and in the other *Lash* a newly made up TOKI vampishly bats her eyes and flirts with the viewer.

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←When viewing an exhibition featuring TOKI, the visitor sees the development of TOKI the hybrid bunny-girl. The reason for showing the evolution of TOKI is twofold: Lee deliberately exposes the construction process by showing the computer graphics behind the character and reveals the maturing TOKI as she develops physically, commanding a wider range of expression and display of ‘personality’. The deliberate exposure of the mechanics of TOKI’s making demonstrates the hyperrealist graphics behind the creation of digital personalities allowing Lee to initiate a dialogue about the relationship of technology and feminism. Moreover, the revelation of the artifice unequivocally presents TOKI as a construct and representative of fantasy. As an avatar TOKI embodies a range of concepts surrounding: hybridity, feminism, identity, sexual power, gaming, aesthetics and cybernetics.

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←The works *Super Toy* and *Powder Room* reveal the construction behind the character of TOKI. *Super Toy* focuses on the creation of two of the most sensitive parts of the body: the nipples and the external genitals of TOKI. The focus on the detailed work needed to create these parts is not only a clinical exercise in beautification, as with all aspects of TOKI it is also highly sexualised. The electrified sound of a clicking mouse accompanies the gentle manipulations of the computer stylus as it nips and tucks here and extends there to give her the most desirable and delicate nipples, clitoris, labia and vagina. Each body part is shown close up on an LCD screen. The screens are installed in an enclosed space painted bright yellow, forcing the viewer into close quarters with the intimate body parts. Lee's choice of yellow intensifies feelings of closeness and intimacy exacerbating any feelings of discomfort.

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←Inside the *Powder Room* TOKI's facial features and hair are undergoing a makeover. The four LCD screens show aspects of TOKI's face as it is refined by the same delicate remodelling as her more intimate parts. Each screen shows either: eyelashes, hair, nose or lips. For the installation of the work *Powder Room* Lee has halved the size of the room and painted it pink so that it resembles a powder room. The four LCD screens are mounted behind the wall and are seen through circular apertures at mirror height. The installation presents the nip and tuck of TOKI as a mirror to visitors. The accompanying soundtrack features Korean pop stars Bee, Boa and Sugar whose hit love songs are sung in a mix of Korean and English.

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←Lee deliberately plays on the connection between the powder room as a place to apply appearance enhancing makeup and a place to achieve perfection. The leap from applying makeup to surgical enhancement of facial features is for many women not a big one, particularly in contemporary Korean society<sup>2</sup>. An exploration of the social pressures behind the use of surgical enhancement to achieve a desirable state of perfection informs all of Lee's work with TOKI. As an avatar TOKI personifies a desirable hybrid of Western and Asian female, and animal. The animal aspect of TOKI is manifest in her rabbit ears. The ears represent a direct translation of her name (TOKI is Korean for bunny) as well as being a reference to the Playboy bunnies, who are likely to be some of the most surgically enhanced women in existence. In Korea the rabbit is also associated with the moon and thus the menstrual cycle. TOKI's human-animal hybridity is also a manifestation of human animality, representing the struggle between the instinctive animal and the rational human.<sup>3</sup> The animal, specifically the rabbit, represents instinctive and uninhibited hyper-sexuality.

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The assignation of woman as hypersexual predator is a role commonly played out through avatars in gaming culture.<sup>4</sup> Asian virtual characters are often hypersexual, however they are generally cutesy in comparison to the gothic depictions of Western characters. TOKI embodies this mix of cute and sexy, which like her anime and manga counterparts, is heavily influenced by European physical traits. Sailor Moon for example is a character Lee has cited as an early influence on the development of TOKI; she is a Japanese character who has yellow hair and big round blue eyes. Manga and anime have a tradition of presenting stories that mix the mundane reality of work or school with fantastic superpowers, the protagonists often leading a double life. Both male and female characters are stereotyped<sup>5</sup>. For women the dominant message is that the societally accepted notion of 'woman' must be achieved and that men must help them reach that state. Women are tied to the weaker role, sexy and helpless, and men to the role of protector. Underlying these roles is the theme of human personal growth and progression of the human race<sup>6</sup>. This noble aim serves to reinforce the gender-based stereotypes by giving legitimacy to the assigned roles. The pressure to conform derived from the presence of these roles is immense, not least in Korea with the rise of plastic surgery focused on Europeanising facial features.

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←After the refinements of the powder room TOKI has emerged to feature in *Lash*. *Lash* is a large circular projection showing TOKI's face. The projection echoes the circular 'mirrors' in *Powder Room*, this time though TOKI is larger than life. Strikingly glamorous in front of a pulsating coloured background, TOKI is the epitome of pretty cute. In *Lash* TOKI is also a seductress, as she moves from cute to aroused. Her hair changes and the colour of her lips mutates from pale like her skin to swollen and bright red. Her batting eyelashes accompanied by a whiplash sound effect allude to sexual play of dominance and submission, much like her change from cute to sensual treads the line between submission and power. The subtle shifts between these states are echoed in the ambiguous positioning of the viewer in relation to the work. At times TOKI is playing to the viewer, at times she is playing to the mirror, moving the viewer from participant to voyeur in another typical sexual power play. Either way, the viewer is largely a passive participant in TOKI's game. Lee deliberately addresses the passive/active split with TOKI in relation to the position of women in society. Visual culture has a tradition of representing women as there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own; when they do they are demonised.

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←As the viewer's perception of their relation to *Lash* shifts so TOKI is playing with the roles of surveyor and surveyed. As John Berger has discussed women are taught to continually watch themselves: men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at, determining relations between men and women and the relationship women have with themselves.<sup>7</sup> Rejecting the mirror as a symbol of vanity, the perception of TOKI as alone with the mirror is a powerful one; she is becoming self aware; she is pleasuring herself and her self-awareness gives her power.

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←Returning to the powder room, it is also a place of refuge; a women only space, where one can hide, talk, cry and reapply the makeup that allows many women to feel sufficiently presentable to face the world. Furthermore, although it may seem too noble a suggestion, it can function as a place of truth similar to the *chamber de beauté*. While holed up in the women's room Marilyn French's Mira is confronted by what she presumes is a drawing of female genitalia, although she is not sure having "never seen her own, that being a part of the anatomy that did not present itself directly to the vision."<sup>8</sup> This is where feminism fought back against the passivity of the surveyed and the vanity of looking, by encouraging women to use their compact mirrors to familiarise themselves with their genitals as an act of empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> Benoit de Sainte-Maure *Romane de Troie* cited in Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet *The Mirror: a history* trans. Katharine H. Jewett, Routledge, London 2001 p. 159

<sup>2</sup> See Dr. Barry King's essay in this catalogue for further detail on this subject.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.ferrum.edu/philosophy/rene.htm> for a further discussion of the theories of Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud and Georges Bataille in relation to animality.

<sup>4</sup> See Claudia Hart and Claudia Herbst *Virtual sex: the female body in digital art*  
<http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2005/72/hartherbst.html> 27/05/2005

<sup>5</sup> A fuller discussion of the complexities of anime and manga is not possible within the scope of this essay. For articles and essays on the subject go to: <http://www.mit.edu:8001/afs/athena.mit.edu/user/r/e/rei/WWW/Anime.html>

<sup>6</sup> Eri Izawa *The new stereotypes of anime and manga* [http://www.ex.org/2.8/45-essay\\_stereotypes.html](http://www.ex.org/2.8/45-essay_stereotypes.html) 16/05/2005

<sup>7</sup> John Berger *Ways of Seeing* British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, London, 1972 p.47

<sup>8</sup> Marilyn French *The Women's Room* Random House, New York, Toronto, 1977 p.2